

Operational Resilience and Service Recovery Strategies of Nepali-Owned Restaurants in Japan During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:- This study investigates the operational resilience and service recovery measures of Nepali-owned restaurants in Shinjuku Ward, out of the 23 wards in Tokyo Metropolitan, Japan, during the COVID-19 outbreak. With five key elements—diversifying service models, engaging patrons actively, supporting workers, prioritizing health and safety precautions, and displaying financial resilience—these restaurants have shown extraordinary flexibility. In order to increase customer satisfaction and trust, the service recovery study demonstrated the value of customer input, adaptable managerial reactions, successful employee-customer interactions, and resolution techniques. Although restaurant approaches differed, these findings highlighted their determination and commitment to client satisfaction and safety. These findings have broader implications for Japanese culture, public policies, immigrant communities, and the service industry beyond the restaurant business. They highlight the importance of multicultural contributions, proactive public support, immigrant community resilience, and customer-centric strategies in overcoming obstacles and promoting inclusivity.

Keywords:- Service Recovery, Operational Resilience, Nepali-Owned Restaurants, Small and Medium Enterprises.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over 1,800 Nepalese have migrated from a single rural village in Nepal's Western Hills, known as Malma in the Western Hills of Nepal, to work in Nepali restaurants in Japan (Kharel, 2016). Malma village is an example in Nepal, and from other parts of Nepal, the number of Nepalese in Japan is increasing yearly. The study focuses on those Nepali-owned restaurants owned by Nepalese who have survived during and after COVID-19, particularly in the Shinjuku ward of Tokyo, Japan. In Shinjuku ward, there is a Shin Okubo and Okubo along Okubo Street, and this is renowned as a hub of multiculturalism and referred to as "Korean Town." Nevertheless, other foreigners are currently increasing for living and business purposes. There are around 600 Nepalese restaurants in Tokyo and 30 Nepalese restaurants on Okubo Street near Shin Okubo and Okubo. Shin-Okubo is a hub for Nepali cuisine and restaurants, grocery stores, remittance companies, and many more.

Moreover, Nepalese restaurants are increasing in Japan (Morimoto, 2019).

The rate of Nepalese migrants in Japan is 96,824, which has increased more than seven times over the last decade by the end of 2019 (Bhandari et al., 2021). The rate is still growing, and the scenario says it will not stop. According to Basnet & Kago (2023), around 140,000 Nepalese are residents of Japan and hold the sixth position as a foreigner living in Japan. Within five years, nearly fifty thousand Nepalese populations are increasing in Japan. Nepali restaurants thrive in Okubo and Shin-Okubo areas within Shinjuku Ward due to nearby Nepali schools and a supportive ecosystem of menu design, remittance companies, and shopping facilities in Asian grocery stores. This is also a reason for me to choose Shinjuku Ward to collect data through an interview.

Restaurants and Izakayas (Japanese-style pubs) are the platforms where they drink and dine while conversing and openly exchanging personal and official issues and things they are not allowed to say openly in the workplace. This is the unique work culture of Japan, a phenomenon known as "Nomination." According to Dinesh Prasad Chapagain, "Nomination" is an essential feature of Japanese-style management. It is common in Japan to exchange information during eating and drinking in bars and Japanese-style pubs after work. The Japanese government motivates youth to consume more alcohol, which has become sensational news worldwide, and the reason to motivate is to collect the tax. (Abbasi & Russon, 2022; Yeung & Ogura, 2022). Every year, it makes a remarkable contribution to the economy of Japan.

Undoubtedly, the restaurant industry contributes significantly to the global economy. Nevertheless, this industry is susceptible to natural disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other downturns (Dube et al., 2020). COVID-19 puts restaurants in a problematic situation and drives them to transform and convert the transitional practices and beliefs to new practices, adapt, and create solutions and resiliency, depending on how complex the impact is on the organization. Due to COVID-19, there have

¹"Nomination" is a combination of two Japanese words: "Nomi" (飲み) and "Communication" (コミュニケーション). The meaning of the Japanese word is to drink.

been changes in operational practices in the restaurant's organization and extreme safety measures implemented. Different working conditions and adopting new and improved workplace policies and actions will limit human contact (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

The research findings indicate that the most influential factors in the system promote the development and growth of the restaurant industry during COVID-19 as a "new normal." The new normal includes protocol compliance, delivery services, and hygiene training in hygiene and disinfection, vital drivers for future planning (Limaymanta et al., 2022). **Lakshmi and Shareena's (2020)** study suggests that in the post-COVID-19 environment, the following aspects should be considered: 1. health and safety, i.e., hygiene and sanitation of the restaurant; 2. Financing to continue operations, 3. Technology is essential when digitization is always present, places, and conditions, as it speeds up and facilitates the work of all operators. Customers, for their part, must receive all types of information leading to placing orders, knowing the menu, etc., and be treated with kindness and in hygienic and safe conditions.

Understanding restaurant operations' resilience capacities and the factors that influence these capacities is essential to assisting restaurants in overcoming the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The four determinants of resilience, namely social capital (i.e., restaurant rating), physical capital (i.e., contactless service), economic capital (i.e., chain operation), and natural capital (i.e., location), significantly influence the ability of restaurant businesses to withstand the challenges posed by the pandemic (Liu et al., 2022).

Service recovery theory recognizes consumer complaining behavior, managerial response to those behaviors, and resolution (Fisk et al., 1993), and the operational resilience framework investigates the resilience factors in terms of operations. (Liu et al., 2022). Despite having a small staff, Nepali-owned restaurants have remained open in Japan throughout and after COVID-19. These employees have some of the fundamental abilities needed for the business. However, the majority lack of the communication and technological skills needed to succeed in the quickly evolving Japanese society. Therefore, this study aims to comprehend the service recovery strategy used by Nepali-run restaurants and the operational resilience framework they implemented to maintain their operations during the post-COVID period.

The structure of this paper is summarized with a literature review, research methodology section, and result and implications section.

➤ *Literature Review Section:*

The background for COVID-19 is provided in the section on the literature review, which also offers insights from earlier studies on the frameworks for service recovery and operational resilience. The section focuses on different components of service recovery and operational resilience of restaurant industries worldwide.

➤ *Research methodology:*

The research method section describes a qualitative approach incorporating service recovery and operational resilience frameworks.

➤ *Result and implication Section:*

In this part, we share the study's findings, explain their importance and implication in policy development, particularly for small-scale restaurants, and how they will affect them.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Service recovery involves those actions designed to resolve problems and alter negative attitudes of dissatisfaction. The study examines Nepali cook's social, economic, and structural vulnerabilities by emphasizing their responses to the pandemic and its outcome. The study shows how the vulnerability and the unequal effects of the pandemic, compounded by pre-existing social inequality, exploitation, and socio-economic hierarchies, are reverberating throughout the Nepali restaurant industry. (Kharel, 2022). Ota Tomoyuki (2022) shared that the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was not homogeneity, and the coping strategy depended on social context. The study also found out Nepalese restaurant owners and cooks faced severe income decline, while Nepalese students and permanent staff of Japanese companies were less impacted. Both Japanese language skills and local social networks influence migrants' coping strategies. The above study revealed that in Japan, the effects of COVID-19 vary from person to person.

Unlike tangible goods, one hundred percent quality cannot be engineered into a service, especially when even the definition of the service is in the eyes of the beholder. So, service recovery recognizes topics like consumer complaining behavior, managerial responses to these behaviors, and employee-customer complaint interactions and resolution. (Fisk et al., 1993) Every business should be alert for not losing valuable customer, according to industry experts, it costs much more to replace a customer than to retain one to five times more. The fact is that in services, no matter how rigorous the procedures and employee training or how advanced the technology, zero defects is an unattainable goal. Train Employees on recovery training, empower the front line, and effectively close the loop, which means addressing customer issues is an essential component of service recovery².

Service recovery involves those actions designed to resolve problems, alter the negative attitudes of dissatisfied customers, and ultimately retain these customers. Due to unexpected factors and environmental factors, there are chances of mistakes in service delivery. Service failure and success at recovery are the results of the operational activities

²<https://hbr.org/1990/07/the-profitable-art-of-service-recovery#:~:text=The%20surest%20way%20to%20recover,job%20to%20alter%20the%20routine.>

of the organization. (Miller, et.al, 2000). Service failures typically result from failure points in the service delivery process, and recovery efforts require employee intervention and specific activities to accommodate and retain the customer (Shostack, 1984).

The Romanian government restricted the COVID-19 pandemic to restaurants and compelled them to adapt to new normal circumstances and develop creative innovations. As a result, the regular restaurant business transformed the food ordering system and delivery platforms. The study's findings indicate that the four innovation variables, including business strategy innovations, technological innovations, financial innovations, and social innovations, have varying impacts on people's intention to use and their attitude toward these ordering and delivery platforms (Turkes et al., 2021).

The study shared that SME decision-makers were observed to be changing their day-to-day operations and management strategies to mitigate the movement control order (MCO) imposed by the Malaysian government due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The findings show that there are significant adaptations made and actions taken to (i) nurture creativity, (ii) sustain reputation, and (iii) maintain profitability by SME restaurants in Malaysia (W. et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2020). Research on resilience, with the study of 339 papers, books, and book chapters published between 1977 and 2014, viewed resilience as (i) organizational responses to external threats, (ii) organizational reliability, (iii) employee strengths, (iv) the adaptability of business models, or (v) design principles that reduce supply chain vulnerabilities and disruptions (Linnenluecke, 2017).

In conclusion, distinct Covid-19 pandemic scenarios involve a variety of resilience and adaptability characteristics. The study also highlights the crucial responsibilities that service recovery plays in the service sector while admitting the difficulty of obtaining perfection and highlighting the value of staff development and efficient complaint handling for retaining clients. The study also shows the creative modifications made by Romanian restaurants in response to the pandemic, illuminating how these modifications—which span business strategy, technology, finance, and social dynamics—affect consumer behavior. And attitudes toward platforms for food ordering and delivery. The part also explores how Malaysian small- and medium-sized eateries were able to adjust to government regulations by fostering inventiveness, protecting their reputations, and assuring ongoing profitability. The review also offers insights into the academic discourse on resilience. Drawing on a thorough analysis of numerous papers and publications, it reveals a variety of viewpoints on resilience, including organizational responses to external threats, dependability, employee strengths, adaptability of business models, and strategies to lessen supply chain vulnerabilities and disruptions. Overall, this literature assessment highlights the complexity of resilience and adaptability, especially in the face of novel obstacles like the COVID-19 pandemic and attitudes toward platforms for food ordering and delivery. The part also explores how Malaysian small- and medium-sized eateries were able to adjust to government

regulations by fostering inventiveness, protecting their reputations, and assuring ongoing profitability. The review also offers insights into the academic discourse on resilience. Drawing on a thorough analysis of numerous papers and publications, it reveals a variety of viewpoints on resilience, including organizational responses to external threats, dependability, employee strengths, adaptability of business models, and strategies to lessen supply chain vulnerabilities and disruptions. Overall, this literature assessment highlights the complexity of resilience and adaptability, especially in the face of novel obstacles like the COVID-19 pandemic.

III. METHODOLOGY

The researchers used the qualitative method, and the study was conducted through face-to-face interviews as a primary data collection method. The interview was conducted with fourteen (14) Nepalese owner-run restaurants that not only survived the challenges posed by the pandemic but also continue to operate in the Japanese market, providing an insightful and personal perspective on their experiences. The qualitative research method is a valuable approach for exploring complex phenomena, as it allows researchers to gain profound insights into the subject matter by examining it in its natural context.

The service recovery theory is applied to this research to understand how restaurants manage service recovery, customer loyalty, compensation strategies during COVID-19, and employee training. It offers insights into how these restaurants handled customer complaints, service disruptions, and recovery efforts, vital to maintaining business continuity during a crisis. Simultaneously, the operation resilience framework was applied to assess resilience through key components such as risk assessment, preparedness, response, recovery, and continuous improvement. This framework allowed the restaurants to comprehensively evaluate how the restaurants navigated the pandemic, identified potential risks, prepared themselves, respond to the crisis, recovered operations, and integrated lessons learned for future improvement. I used thematic analysis for this qualitative research, which is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

IV. RESULTS

The research involved fourteen Nepali-run restaurants in the Tokyo Metropolitan Shinjuku ward and examined the following themes based on their experiences during and after post-COVID-19.

A. Covid-19 Service Failure:

Restaurants had several difficulties throughout the pandemic, with two main themes developing. The first subject was "Supply Shortages and Operational Challenges," where many businesses battled because of a shortage of necessities, including sanitary items and alcoholic drinks, causing operational challenges and delays in food delivery. The second common topic was "Staffing Issues and Regulatory Restrictions," which included operational

adjustments, employee misunderstandings over discounts, temporary closures because personnel caught the virus, and challenges meeting delivery requests. Customers also wanted more relaxed time constraints. The operational and personnel challenges restaurants had during the pandemic, which affected their service quality and customer satisfaction levels, are collectively highlighted by these topics.

B. Service Recovery Framework:

Within a thorough service recovery framework, restaurants showed exceptional adaptation and resilience in the face of the unmatched problems brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the trend in consumer tastes toward contactless eating, they broadened their service models by embracing delivery and takeout choices and even introducing new delivery services. They also actively engaged customers by tailoring menus to regional preferences, taking part in government programs like the "Go to Eat" campaign, and building relationships with clients through continuing online advertising. To maintain a motivated workforce, restaurants simultaneously assisted their personnel by helping with government paperwork and giving necessities to people who had lost their employment. Strict adherence to government safety rules was essential to creating dining spaces.

These specifications gave particular attention to sanitation, hygienic conditions, and ventilation. Their ability to manage their finances and acknowledge the assistance offered by the government and their determination helped them with a sense of confidence to face the uncertainty or new normal. Finally, restaurants changed their services to meet client demands, frequently emphasizing delivery-based choices. Overall, these multiple approaches demonstrate the commitment and creativity of restaurants as they overcame the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 outbreak, resolving service issues while placing a premium on the security and happiness of their patrons.

The analysis for the service recovery framework was based on the following components (Fisk et al., 1993):

➤ *Consumer Complaining Behavior:*

Restaurants' particular conditions and difficulties during the COVID-19 outbreak had a significant impact on consumer complaint behavior. Customers quickly expressed their worries about safety and sanitation, frequently using online reviews and feedback sites like Demaegan, Tabelog, etc. Their grievances concentrated on the accessibility of feminine hygiene supplies, alcohol, and safety regulations. Patron input was essential in directing restaurant developments, with several eateries actively tracking and responding to reviews to fix issues and modify their offerings.

➤ *Managerial Responses to these Behaviors:*

Restaurant owners and management showed flexibility and adaptation in response to customer concerns. They aggressively sought government assistance and recovery-related programs, embracing technological advancements, including the development of websites and

the introduction of delivery services to satisfy changing consumer needs. To regain client trust and loyalty, managers also demonstrated a solid commitment to following safety regulations set out by the government. The owner and management extended their support not only to their staff but also to their families. They helped with paperwork to access government support and provided essential supplies to those who had lost their jobs and received government assistance.

➤ *Employee-Customer Complaint Interactions Goal of Complaint Resolution:*

The service recovery procedure requires effective conversations between employees and customers regarding complaints, which are essential to retaining their trust. Restaurants should analyse customer feedback, including online comments and reviews, and listen carefully to their concerns. Restaurant management must understand the need for employee training to handle complaints professionally and sympathetically to guarantee an excellent client experience. Managers stressed the need for staff members to comprehend and follow government safety regulations and thoroughly explain these steps to clients to reduce their anxieties. This strategy helps to enhance the sense of trust and security of customers while dining. The goal of this resolution process is to enhance customer satisfaction and regain trust during the challenging COVID-19 era.

The success of these tactics in preserving consumer loyalty and confidence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic varied. For instance, Solmari Restaurant and Salute Meat Bar and Cheese stressed adherence to safety procedures to win patron trust while utilizing delivery and takeout options to accommodate shifting tastes. Hangout Restaurant & Bar prominently displayed government-issued safety labels, which discovered that doing so comforted patrons and prompted them to visit again. In line with regional plans for economic recovery, government programs assisted Amardeep Restaurant in adopting modern technology. In conclusion, these tactics showed how flexible and resilient restaurants were throughout the pandemic, proving their dedication to regaining patron trust and maintaining safety in the face of unthinkable obstacles.

C. Operational Resilience Framework

In the context of operational resilience, several key themes emerged from the transcripts provided by restaurant owners, which were based on the study conducted by Linnenluecke in 2017:

➤ *Organizational Response to External Threats:*

Restaurant owners emphasized—the difficulties they encountered following the pandemic in responding to external threats. Staffing-related issues had a considerable impact on their operations, such as a shortage of chefs skilled in making traditional food, rising employee wages, and alcohol restrictions. Some restaurant owners and management announced relocating staff members to foreign nations such as Canada and America for better professional careers and educational prospects for their children.

➤ *Organizational Reliability:*

Restaurants have taken steps to overcome disruptions due to staffing shortages, shortened business hours, or operating with replacement employees. Their primary focus was maintaining transparent and reliable customer communication concerning supply chain issues or menu modification.

➤ *Employee Strengths:*

Challenges were informing the workforce about new delivery techniques and technologies. However, restaurant owners concentrated on inspiring their personnel through various strategies, including assisting in getting driver's licenses, providing Japanese language lessons, and providing ongoing training.

➤ *Adaptability of Business Models:*

Restaurants adapted their customer experiences to meet the demands of social distancing requirements. Partitioning tables, employing plastic barriers, and implementing safety measures such as providing masks and hand sanitizers. Some used contactless services like online payment and food delivery to reduce direct contact with customers. However, they said it took much work to deal with technological issues, including using navigational tools and digital menus. Regarding navigation, it is clear that the Japanese language problem is challenging to find the client's exact location.

➤ *Design Principles that Reduce Supply Chains:*

Restaurants lacked action related to supply chain resilience and indicated insufficient control over this aspect. Design principles that reduce supply chains. When handling supply chain interruptions, they mostly adhered to legislative requirements and counted on supplier collaboration, emphasizing service dependability and client satisfaction.

V. DISCUSSION

Studying Nepali-owned restaurants in the Shinjuku ward of Tokyo during the COVID-19 outbreak revealed crucial new information on the operational resilience and service recovery tactics used by these businesses. Restaurants have shown tremendous adaptation and endurance in the face of enormous obstacles, which may break into five fundamental elements.

First, in response to shifting consumer preferences toward contactless eating, they expanded their service models by adopting delivery, takeout, and even new delivery services. Second, their involvement in government programs like the "Go to Eat" campaign and active client interaction through customized menus demonstrated their dedication to addressing customer complaints and regaining loyalty. In order to maintain a motivated employee, restaurants simultaneously offered support to their staff by assisting with government procedures (including paperwork to support their lifestyle³ and giving necessary items such as masks, tissue paper, ingredients for home-cooked meals, and translating

government updates into the Nepalese languages. Thirdly, the establishment of secure dining spaces that addressed patron concerns regarding health and safety was made possible by careful adherence to government safety requirements, with an emphasis on sanitation, hygienic conditions, and ventilation. Fourthly, Due to financial adaptability and government assistance, restaurants became more determined and self-assured during COVID-19. Finally, they demonstrated their dedication to change along with client preferences by adapting to changing customer behavior and focusing on delivery-based solutions.

The analysis of the service recovery framework identified essential elements that were crucial in resolving customer complaints, managerial replies, interactions between employees and customers, and resolution techniques. Customers used online platforms to provide comments and reviews throughout the pandemic, with complaints mainly focused on safety and sanitation issues. This feedback cycle played a key role in guiding restaurant changes. Restaurants actively sought government help and embraced technical improvements to suit shifting consumer expectations, and managerial answers were marked by flexibility and adaptation. The interactions between employees and customers about complaints highlighted how vital staff training is for complaint handling properly and ensuring compliance with safety rules, which promotes confidence and security. Resolution tactics centered on hearing what customers had to say, making the required changes, and encouraging honest and open communication between employees and customers with the ultimate objective of customers' satisfaction and regaining trust.

Several restaurants had different amounts of success with these tactics (Solmari Restaurant's refusing large numbers of gatherings parties at the restaurant's, Salute Meat Bar and Cheese, for instance, focused on safety processes along with delivery and takeaway choices, while Hangout Restaurant & Bar had success by publicly displaying safety labels from the government. The government's objectives for economic recovery via technology relate to Indian Nepali Restaurant Milan and Masala Station. In light of the pandemic, these findings illustrate the resilience and adaptation of restaurants, demonstrating their dedication to patron safety and enjoyment even in the face of unthinkable difficulties. The service industry, such as the restaurant industry, can benefit from this study's insightful recommendations on how to handle crises and efficiently recover.

VI. CONCLUSION

An essential understanding of operational resilience and service recovery techniques has been gained through the research of Nepali-run restaurants in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward during the COVID-19 pandemic. By varying their service patterns, actively engaging customers, assisting their staff, prioritizing health and safety precautions, preserving financial stability, and adapting to changing patron behavior, these restaurants showed exceptional flexibility. These strategies were extremely helpful in helping them overcome

³<https://corona-support.mhlw.go.jp/jukyokakuhokyufukin/aplication.html>

the challenges brought on by the outbreak and maintain client confidence. The importance of customer input, managerial response, employee-customer interactions, and resolution strategies in properly handling complaints was crucially underlined by the analysis of the service recovery framework. Different restaurants used various strategies, focusing on safety precautions, technology advancement, and government backing, demonstrating the industry's flexibility. These results offer insightful guidance on crisis management and effective recovery techniques for the more significant service industry.

When considering these findings in a larger context, they have significant consequences for Japanese culture, governmental policy, immigrant communities, and the restaurant business. First, these restaurants established by Nepalese are perfect examples of the multiracial fabric of Japanese society, showing how immigrant-owned companies can advance regional culture and food. They support intercultural awareness and understanding by adding to the variety and inclusivity of Japanese eating alternatives. Furthermore, from a policy standpoint, the accomplishment of government programs like the "Go to Eat" campaign and the financial support provided to these eateries during the pandemic had the beneficial effects of preemptive government engagement.

Policymakers may learn from this and take similar steps to increase the ability of small enterprises to withstand crises. Thirdly, these restaurants demonstrate the value of flexibility and community support for immigrant populations. They have contributed to the local economy and culture while preserving their cultural history and becoming an essential part of their host community. Lastly, the restaurant sector may profit from these results by realizing the importance of employing customer-centric strategies, embracing new technology, and supporting employees. These insights provide a road map for companies looking to handle upcoming obstacles while upholding client happiness and trust effectively.

However, there is a culture of "Nominication" during the COVID-19 pandemic; government-imposed restrictions and being forced to shorten opening hours to control the virus's spread have significantly impacted the restaurant industry, a key source of revenue because time restrictions for businesses hit the restaurant's revenue.

The survey also revealed that by providing support not only to the employees but also to the families of the employees, they successfully built a relationship of trust that would protect them in the event of an emergency. Nepalese owners have gained the trust of Japanese customers by offering multinational cuisine in the same location and applying taste strategy techniques to develop tastes appealing to the Japanese. According to (Kobayashi (2021), Japanese-born Indian and Nepali cuisine is tailored to Japanese tastes. Japanese-born Indian cuisine evolved by Nepalese culinary experts who intimately understood the Japanese palate's preferences and are well-versed in Japanese tastes.

The main factors in the recovery of the restaurant business in Japan are the loyalty of customers, the trust of employees in the owner, and the financial support of the government.

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